

VZCZCXRO3754  
PP RUEHCI  
DE RUEHKA #6782/01 3470947  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 130947Z DEC 06  
FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2808  
INFO RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 1397  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 9516  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1568  
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 8831  
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 7681  
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA  
RHHMHAA/COMPACFLT PEARL HARBOR HI  
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 006782

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/13/2016

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: GASTRIGHT PRESSES NON-VIOLENCE AND FLEXIBILITY ON  
POLITICAL LEADERS

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia Butenis, Reason(s): 1.4 (d)

11. (SBU) Summary and Introduction. On December 4-5, SCA Deputy Assistant Secretary John Gastright met with senior leaders of Bangladeshi's two major parties, Acting Chief Election Commissioner Rahman, Caretaker Government Advisor Akbar Ali Khan, and business leaders about the state of Bangladeshi elections. He also gave interviews to a local wire service and local TV station. Gastright hammered U.S. points on support for free, fair, credible and non-violent elections, the importance of dialogue to find acceptable solutions to election issues and the potential consequences should the military exceed its constitutional role. He emphasized that violence has no place in a democracy and urged the parties to pursue their aims peacefully. End Summary and Introduction.

KHALEDA ZIA  
-----

12. (C) In his meeting with Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia, Gastright praised BNP's relative restraint on the streets and its flexibility on several key issues. Zia affirmed her commitment to avoid violence, and said she remains flexible on election proposals, so long as they are consistent with the constitution. She complained that Awami League President Sheikh Hasina has repeatedly made new demands whenever her previous concerns were addressed. BNP, she said, is selecting candidates and is ready for elections. Zia opposed any delay of elections beyond the 90-day constitutional limit. The BNP does not want the military to intervene, she said, but could not rule out a military role if the caretaker government could not control a violent situation.

ELECTION COMMISSIONERS  
-----

13. (C) Gastright congratulated the Commission on its productive partnership with the National Democratic Institute (NDI), whose recent survey of the new voter list indicated an error rate well within global norms and free of bias or intimidation. Election Commissioner Zakaria noted that double entries due to death and migration have always been problematic but resolved through the correction process and numerous checks and balances on voting day. He outlined the Commission's seven-day drive starting December 8 to remove as many of the excess names as possible. At Gastright's urging, Rahman and Zakaria confirmed they would work with NDI to facilitate voter list accuracy. All five Commissioners insisted that electoral preparations are well underway for

successful, timely elections.

SHEIKH HASINA  
-----

14. (C) Awami League President Sheikh Hasina assured Gastright that her only goal is free and fair elections, the impediments to which she listed as: a dysfunctional caretaker government; a flawed voter list; an unacceptable Election Commission; and politicization of key civil service positions. She had hoped the advisors' proposals would resolve these issues and had thus suspended the opposition's blockade program as a show of good faith; yet, the advisors still had not formally contacted her about their decisions nor had she seen any action to implement their proposals. She would not rule out resuming the blockade but assured Gastright the protests would be peaceful. What violence had occurred was provoked, she claimed.

15. (C) On the voter list, Hasina dismissed anything short of a new, nationwide door-to-door canvas "in accord with the High Court decision," inconsistently asserting that the list could be updated in several weeks and that the elections should be postponed because of the time needed to produce a new list. In addition to doubting the competence and integrity of the Election Commission, Hasina wondered if international monitors could detect serious election irregularities.

BUSINESS LEADERS  
-----

16. (C) Gastright reviewed the political situation and its

DHAKA 00006782 002 OF 002

impact on business with Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association President Fazlul Haque, Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce President Mir Nasir Hossain, American Chamber of Commerce President Andrew Fawthrop and the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry President Latifur Rahman. The business leaders detailed the economic problems created by the nationwide blockades and strikes, and stressed the need for stability. However, they unequivocally agreed with Gastright that any extra-constitutional use of the military would be undesirable and ineffective in breaking the political logjam.

CARETAKER GOVERNMENT ADVISOR  
-----

17. (C) De facto senior Caretaker Government Advisor Dr. Akbar Ali Khan stated that the crux of the political crisis lay in opposition demands for reconstitution of the Election Commission and a new voter list. He noted several possible replacement formulas for commissioners now under discussion, but said the sort of voter list the Awami League is demanding would take a year to produce. He asserted that both Zia and Hasina are relatively open to compromise but constrained by hard-liners in their own party.

FOREIGN SECRETARY HEMAYETUDDIN  
-----

18. (C) Foreign Secretary Hemayetuddin said there are no foreign policy differences between the BNP and AL for either the US or India. He welcomed the NDI voter survey as fair and constructive, said the political impasse is driven more by ego than issues, but compromise from both sides is needed to move forward. Nobel Peace Prize winner Dr. Yunus, national coalition government suggestion was interesting but impractical, and said a military solution is a "natural place" to look for stability, but the Bangladeshi military is flatly disinterested in such a role. Hemayetuddin said the military will be used, as before, to create a visible deterrent to violence "few days before the election," but would only deploy in force if absolutely necessary.

COMMENT

-----

¶9. (C) Gastright's points received broad media coverage, with the impact of his visit being spun differently by the two political camps. BNP supporters attributed the lifting of the opposition blockade to the visit, while the Awami League attributed to USG "pressure" new BNP thinking on Election Commission reconstitution. In the personality driven world of Bangladeshi politics, it is sometimes easier to credit positive action to outside third parties than the other side.

¶10. (U) This cable has been cleared by DAS Gastright.  
BUTENIS